TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE?

March 26, 1989, Easter Sunday

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

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Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Isaiah 65:17-25
Luke 24:1-12

"...these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them." -Luke 24:11 (RSV)

When you travel with a choir, as I did last summer, you spend a lot of time in churches. And so it was that I was in the front pew of the DOM, the gorgeous ornate high baroque Cathedral in Salzburg, Austria, listening to the Fourth Church Morning Choir rehearsing, and I had time to look carefully...

The high altar in the Cathedral - with its sculpted saints, bishops, angels, other celestial ornamentation and Christ victorious, standing in the center - had to the left and to the right of it a pair of pleasantly, plump cherubs sitting, reposing actually, whimsically leaning on, of all things, a human skull! I thought to myself, that's what all this is about: the eternal, unrelenting question of death, human mortality and hope. That's why these incredible buildings exist, and this music. Instead of tending their crops, minding their children, digging wells, inventing medicine, or generally working to make life easier for themselves, our forebears here and elsewhere, invested their precious capital, labor and, clearly, their greatest love in these places and those whimsical, chubby cherubs reclining on a human skull tell why.

My sense is that this is why we are here this morning. It is why, if you never go to church at any other time, you come on Easter. A Michigan Avenue merchant said to me this week, "Busy time, huh? We both do good at this time of year, but not as good as Christmas, right?" And he was surprised, that even with the overwhelming, quasi-religious cultural Christmas festivities, business is better for churches at Easter.

And the reason is that if a resurrection has happened things are not what they seem, the world is a very different place. We come to church today because at a level deep in our spirits, inhabited by memories of our past and all the people we have ever loved, we want to believe it. We come because at a level deep in our souls when we can hum the tunes of the great Easter hymns, note by note, even though we only sing them once, maybe twice a year, we want desperately to believe it.

What you will not get for coming to church on Easter is a tightly argued rational proof that the resurrection happened. You can choose to believe that it happened; you can live as if it happened; you can die for your conviction that it happened. But the one thing you cannot do is prove that it happened. That is true from the beginning, when in the early light of dawn, three women go to the tomb to anoint the dead body with spices and discover the tomb empty.

But we almost can't resist giving it a try, however. Somewhere in every Easter sermon the preacher must point out that we are a lot less certain about what is possible and what is impossible in this world than we used to be; that science has learned in our age that what we know and understand is not all there is to know and understand. The ambitious preacher can extrapolate from that and point out that there are people making a career studying, researching and writing about out-of-body experiences, back from death experiences, extra-sensory experiences and how, perhaps, what happened to Jesus was not too different from the person who dies on the operating table or in a car accident and then revives later, etc., etc., ad infinitum, ad nauseum. Or the Shroud of Turin, always hot around this time of year... about which the debate will surely go on longer that the half-life of the carbon molecules, which now seem to have gotten into that fabric in the 12th or 13th, not the 1st century... As if it could be proved!

It turns out the Bible doesn't even try. The Bible is smarter than that... Turns out the Bible is frankly, pretty confused on the whole topic. There is no coherent accounting of what transpired in the early morning of the first day of the week. You cannot patch together the four different accounts presented by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. It's not even possible to know for sure who was there... two angels or one... three women or two... Peter and John - or just Peter. People that morning are running around confused, scared to death, excited; one of them bumps into Jesus and doesn't recognize him. It is monumentally imprecise, gloriously confusing. In Luke's account, the two men who are at the tomb when the three women come to anoint the body, which is not there, ask what I believe is one of the best questions in the history of religion, "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" That is to say, the place to look for evidence of the resurrection is not the cemetery but the world: not in arguments about biological plausibility, but in experiences of life emerging from death, of hope and love and courage defeating despair and hatred and cowardice.

So the three women hurry back, we assume to a locked room where the friends of Jesus have been hiding out since Friday afternoon. They tell them what they just saw and heard and with magnificent integrity Luke says, "but these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them." They didn't believe it! The close friends of Jesus who loved him enough to give up everything they had: the very ones who were so over-invested in this project you could forgive them for grasping at any straw however implausible - these people concluded that it was too good to be true: "Nonsense" is a literal translation of the Greek.

What you don't get for coming to church on Easter is proof... a picture... a formula... an assurance from an official in a white coat and clipboard that "lab tests show"... When I was a youngster we used to get

a cheap hyacinth, or a bulb to plant in the hopes that somehow we'd get the point...

What you do get, however, if you take the time to look carefully, is astonishment. The unarguable fact is that a small group of men and women, totally defeated and demoralized, became convinced that their dead leader was alive and then went out and convinced the rest of the world.

The friends of Jesus were convinced that the resurrection happened, even if they couldn't describe or explain it very thoroughly. When you begin to think about that - what transformed those people, what changed them from understandably and predictably discouraged individuals into a community so strong and so dedicated and so loyal that they were glad to die for their faith - you have to conclude that whatever it was that happened to them, they were gloriously free of the normal human fears and anxieties which impinge on and inhibit and limit most of us.

They were free because of what they were convinced happened to Jesus, from the power of death... free from fear, free to be brave and alive as perhaps no one else in all of history had been before. They exuded a profound joy and freedom from the dread of dying, which is quite simply the major characteristic of our humanity.

"Have you noticed yet that you will die?" asks Annie Dillard in a lovely paragraph about what it means to be alive. "You step aside from the dreaming, fast, loud routine and feel time as a stillness about you and hear the silent air asking in so thin a voice, 'Have you noticed yet that you will die?'" [An American Childhood.]

Literature is full of it, this poignant expression of our mortality, from the Psalter to ancient philosophy to modern poetry. In his new book, Self Consciousness, John Updike writes about aging and the nearness of death. "We secretly doubt it. As we get older we go to more and more funerals, and sit there in a stony daze, somehow convinced that it will never happen to us, or if it does, we will be essentially elsewhere." [p. 250]

To be alive is to know about death. It makes no sense whatever to deny it or disguise it, or to pretend that it is not real. Religion that is all sunshine and flowers, religion that refuses to acknowledge and participate in the pathos, the tragic, the reality of death, is of no help to anyone.

The Bible is consistent about that. The crucifixion of Jesus is at the center of it. Before it gets to resurrection the Bible makes the blunt point that goodness and life and love often end up dead in this world. Think about it from the perspective of his friends, the ones who were persuaded to walk away from their jobs and families to follow him. Those people were inspired by him but also by his vision of a new kingdom, a new reality, in which love and justice and kindness were the operational values. When he died so did the vision, so did their hopes and dreams and aspirations; so did they. Easter begins, not with sunny affirmations about the innate goodness of the creation, but with the exact opposite, with an honest, unprotected acknowledgement that bad things happen in this world

and death is real. I've always been tempted to take William Willimon literally when he suggests that Christian churches ought to put on their bulletin boards on Easter, "No one gets in who wasn't here Friday." There is a sense in which what we celebrate today is good news only insofar as you know what that cross means.

Friday was the day the friends of Jesus faced reality; that goodness and love and compassion are no match for cruelty and indifference. Jesus dies and no one notices. Friday is the day when we are left with emptiness, with the sense that we all live out our days under the pall of mortality. We go to Scotland for a reunion with old friends. David Moffatt, Oxford graduate, sheepfarmer, strong Scotsman who loved Bonhoeffer and Hans Kung - has died thirty years before he should have; and so has dear Dollie MacKenzie, up in the Highlands, our friend, and the one to whom you could entrust your own children for a wee while. That's reality.

So when Jesus died on a cross his friends got a healthy dose of the reality, which is what life in this world is about. And it makes no sense to live with illusion: far better to be realistic. When the women returned on Sunday morning the friends of Jesus knew that what they were hearing was too good to be true.

For you see, if in some way Jesus didn't stay dead, then as a matter of fact we live in a different world, in spite of appearances. If Jesus didn't stay dead, death is robbed of its deadly power, so to speak. Of course it's awful. Of course the end of human life is sad. It is a bit of histrionic overstatement to conclude that Christians welcome death as a better deal than this world. Even Jesus didn't say that! But if what those women said was true, death has lost its power and we are free - gloriously free in a way we didn't know before.

You push language to its limits when you try to talk about the resurrection, Hans Kung observed, but then he used it beautifully:

> "I have confidence that God will have something further to say, that he has the last word as well as the first, that he is the God of the end as well as the beginning..." [Eternal Life, p. 113, 114]

At a deeply personal level, the Resurrection of Jesus Christ means that God's love for you knows no end... God's loving care for you does not stop when you die... Because Jesus Christ did not stay dead, we are free.

Christians live with a "cheerful impudence" about the powers of this world, says David Buttrick [Preaching Jesus Christ, p. 52]. What you and I are summoned to do with the good news of this day is not simply wallow in it, but allow it to stiffen our backbone and fill us with resolve to live for and fight for the resurrection - the vision of the Risen Lord's Kingdom.

The real summons of Easter is not to snoop around an empty tomb looking for evidence, but to begin to live with the new reality that

Jesus Christ is alive and present in the world and that in his name there is work to do --

people to love...
wrongs to right...
hungry to feed...
homeless to shelter...
and dear, beloved people near and
far, to hold tightly.

Sometimes you see it boldly. On Sunday, April 8, 1945, Dietrich Bonhoeffer led a worship service and spoke to his follow prisoners... in the Nazi prison where he was held. Listen to how one of them remembers it...

"He had hardly finished his last prayer when the door opened and two men in civilian clothes came in and said, 'Prisoner Bonhoeffer, get ready to come with us.' Those words, 'come with us' for all prisoners they had come to mean only one thing - the scaffold.

"We bade him goodbye - he drew me aside - 'This is the end' he said, 'for me the beginning.' Next day, at Flossenburg he was hanged." [Payne Best, The Verlo Incident, in the Editor's Forward, Letters and Papers From Prison, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, p. 14]

Allan Boesak, University Chaplain in Capetown, South Africa, was leading a worship service which the government had banned because it was a service of prayer on behalf of those detained by the government. In barged the police and ordered him to stop, threatening to arrest the whole church. "Sir," Boesak responded, with knees shaking in fear, "this is the church of God... I will not be quiet. You sit down and you listen to the word of God." And the police captain walked out and Boesck proceeded.

A cheerful impudence is what the resurrection gives us... Sometimes it is publicly heroic and sometimes, more frequently, it is private and quiet, and equally heroic:

... at the Rehabilitation Institute, when people confined to wheel chairs will not give up -

... on the cancer floor where repeated surgery and the debilitation of chemotherapy simply are unable to defeat the human spirit -

... on the 9th floor of the tenement, where a mother will not give in to the powers of death and keeps loving her teenager with courage and strength -

... the man who will not give in to the deadly power of his addiction -

... the woman who will not allow discrimination to defeat or deter her -

... the politician who makes a costly and difficult and honest decision -

... on the street, in the office, the courtroom, boardroom, laboratory, classroom, where men and women simply refuse to accommodate the powers of death, greed and cruelty and instead, stubbornly, cheerfully insist that it is a different world.

It comes down to a choice finally. Once a year we celebrate it. And the celebration involves looking at the story and the evidence and the history and the record of how others have lived it out.

But finally it comes to a personal choice. Not simply to trot it out as a possibility every spring time and then forget about it for another year. But a choice to live this and every day in the glorious freedom of the resurrection, knowing

that death has been conquered,
that death's power over you and your
loved ones and your hopes and dreams
and aspirations, has been broken...

We do push language to its limits. So may it be celebrated in the love and laughter of this beautiful day... in gorgeous yellow flowers and gorgeous music. And celebrated in that oldest Christian tradition of all... The Proclamation. Please affirm it with me - Choose it - Proclaim it.

Jesus Christ is Risen!

He is Risen Indeed!

Indeed.